

February 14, 2025

The Honorable Thomas A. Varlan
United States District Court
Eastern District of Tennessee
600 Market Street
Knoxville, TN 37902

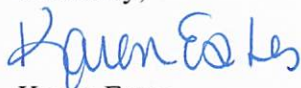
The Honorable Thomas Varlan,

I am writing this letter in regard to the sentencing of Matthew Estes. As Matthew's adoptive mother, I am aware of the dynamics of this case and request that you consider Matthew's history when deciding his sentencing in this case. I request that you take into consideration the following:

- Matthew was born and survived his first three years of life in the worst of conditions.
- Matthew was placed in custody of the Tennessee Department of Children's Services at the age of three. During this time, Matthew did not receive adequate services from the Tennessee Department of Children's Services as this department was in a state of upheaval during those years.
- Matthew was sentenced over eight years ago, as an adult, for a crime that he committed as a minor. Matthew accepted his sentence and should not receive additional sentencing for the same crime again.
- Matthew's entire family and friends have suffered enough.
- Matthew has not caused any issues within his correctional facilities.
- Matthew advocated for educational opportunities for inmates, and once they became available, Matthew participated in these opportunities where he excelled. Matthew received several degrees, he was the valedictorian of his class, he was admired and respected by his professors, and he tutored inmates for them to also receive their degrees.

As you prepare your sentencing for Matthew, I request that you take into consideration that Matthew has demonstrated that he wants to be successful, he deserves a chance to be successful, and for these reasons, I humbly request that you sentence him to the lowest possible sentence possible under his plea agreement.

Sincerely,



Karen Estes

The Honorable Thomas A. Varlan
United States District Court
Eastern District of Tennessee
800 Market Street
Knoxville, TN 37902

Dear Judge Varlan,

I am writing on behalf of Matthew Estes who has entered a guilty plea pertaining to the charges against him and will appear before you for sentencing. I am respectfully asking that you mercifully sentence Matthew to the lowest sentence possible under his plea agreement.

I am currently the Executive Director of the Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee (CAC) where I have served for more than 50 years developing, implementing, and overseeing a comprehensive range of services supporting the people of Knox County who need special services such as Mobile Meals, Head Start, employment, rental assistance, transportation, and other services in order to live safely and thrive. I am also an active member of Church of Savior UCC, whose belief in justice and power of love guides my life.

Matthew's adoptive parents, Karen and Jason Estes, were both outstanding members of the CAC leadership team, dedicated to public service when they adopted Matthew and his brother, Michael. Both believed in the good work we do at CAC and were dedicated to public service and to making our community better for all. Karen remains a valued CAC employee; Jason has moved on to a career in the private sector. It was important for Karen and Jason to adopt as Jason had been adopted and wanted to share his life in the way he had benefitted.

I first met Matthew as a scared, over medicated 6-year-old. Over the years, I came to know him as a child of friends—going to birthday parties, school and holiday events. As a teen I employed Matthew as an afterschool companion and to help with chores as my husband Richard, a retired professor, recovered from heart surgery. Matthew was kind, capable, and totally dependable. He and Richard developed a friendship that lasted until Richard's death in 2023.

We were shocked and heartbroken when Matthew offended in an unspeakable way, was arrested, charged, and was sentenced to a long prison term in State prison as part of a plea agreement. My husband and I committed to stand by and befriend Matthew as others were, understandably, unable to accept the situation. My relationship with Matthew has deepened and grown during his incarceration. I have connected with him by phone on almost daily basis over the last seven years. As such, I am familiar with Matthew's experience and growth over these years.

He made the best of a very difficult situation at Trausdale where he completed a carpentry class and became a teacher's assistant. He managed to survive there until he was transferred to Northeast Correctional Complex in Mt. City. He was determined to take advantage of the improved circumstances at Northeast.

At Northeast we were able to send the Knoxville News Sentinel on a regular basis to provide a reference point to the community other than prison life. Matthew likes to read and we had been sending him the young adult adventure books he requested. My husband Richard was Emeritus Professor of Literature at UT specializing in the Victorian period. He decided to introduce Matthew to Charles Dickens—long complicated novels with lots of characters. They started with Richard's favorite, Great Expectations, and Matthew said he had to keep a dictionary by his side for the first half of this very long novel. But it didn't take Matthew long to get used to the style and language. He came to love Dickens, saying reading Dickens took him to another place and time—away from prison. It may not be relevant but he read A Tale of Two Cities, A Christmas Carol, David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, Hard Times, and others. His favorites were Oliver Twist and David Copperfield. I wish Richard could tell you of his experiences with Matthew, but I heard him say more than once that Matthew had more insight into the characters and the relationships among them than some of his students at University.

We also introduced him to other authors and formats. I mention the books he read to indicate not only his intelligence, but also his interest in “people” characters he was reading about. Books he read and discussed included: Catcher in the Rye, To Kill a Mockingbird, Grapes of Wrath, Of Mice and Men, East of Eden, Old Man and the Sea, A Farewell to Arms, Red Badge of Courage, Sun Also Rises, Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn and others.

About the same time, Matthew began to write essays and poetry. I wish Richard was here to comment on that, but as I said, he died in May 2023 as a result of a fall. Perhaps this is too personal, but while I was in palliative care at UT waiting for Richard to die, Matthew called regularly to pray with me for comfort and strength and for Richard's soul. We still try to pray together, but it is difficult with the phone system at Blount County Jail.

Shortly after he arrived at Northeast, Matthew became associated with a religious group, Kairos. Kairos is a volunteer prison ministry that seeks to develop Christian community inside prison. Volunteers spread the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. As significant part of the experience is the Kairos Walk which is a three-and-a-half-day retreat with worship, study, discussion, and personal reflections. At the end of the Walk an inmate is asked to make the closing talk which is aimed at encouraging participants to take the Walk experience back to their cells and everyday life. At the end of his first Walk, Matthew was asked to give the closing speech. He was terrified. He wrote it out carefully so he wouldn't mess up in front of everyone. Volunteer family members could share with you their reactions to Matthew's speech, but the rules of the organization prohibit that type of

involvement. I know that one family who prays together for Matthew everyday said that his 10-year-old was committed to being a Kairos volunteer when he got to be 18. And another told me, that Matthew was “on fire for the Lord.”

Matthew gave 4 final speeches during his time at Northeast. The second one was published in the Kairos newsletter. We are trying to locate a copy for you to read. Unfortunately, Matthew’s copy was left at Northeast when he was moved without notice to Blount County Jail.

During his time at Northeast, Matthew committed to being a contributing member to the community he found himself in. He wants to have his life mean something. He had meaningful relationships with the educational staff at Northeast including Principal Michael Icenhover; Mr. Quabe a teacher; Mr. Tester a teacher that Matthew assisted as a teacher’s aide doing office work, setting up files, and using his computer skills to make things easier. I spoke with Mr. Tester at graduation and he was very complimentary of Matthew’s skills, attitude, and work ethic. Ms. Henson and Ms. Crowder are HiSET teachers at Northeast. This is a high school equivalency program. Matthew taught classes and did individual tutoring, especially in Math. Everyone I spoke to at the graduation commented that Matthew was “appreciated.” Again, I am sorry that the rules of the prison do not allow for these individuals to contact you directly on Matthew’s behalf.

When Matthew left Northeast for Blount County, his celly was an 81-year-old man with one leg. Matthew helped him as much as he could especially with toileting. Matthew has expressed concern on several occasions about how he was doing and if anyone was helping him. I offer this as a brief look into Matthew’s kindness and concern for others. This is in addition to hours of his weekend and off time spent in the library tutoring on a volunteer basis. He told me of one person who could not be released until he passed the HiSET and how very difficult math was for him, but he finally passed. Matthew was also approved by the Warden and medical staff as an inmate observer. He would be called sometimes in the middle of the night when an inmate was on suicide watch. He would take his Bible and read, pray, talk, or just watch as was appropriate and needed.

When Matthew got the opportunity to participate in the Northeast Community College program, he was beside himself with anticipation and vowed to make the most of this unexpected opportunity. He committed himself to being a straight A student. I think his high school GPA was 2.6. He gave up movies and reading for pleasure to concentrate on his studies. During this time, all we talked about on the phone was teachers, classes, and what he was learning.

On May 11, 2023, Matthew was one of 13 students receiving the Associate of Science Degree. He graduated Summa Cum Laude with a 4.0 GPA. Matthew was elected to Phi Theta Kappa which is the official honor society of community colleges. It is comparable to Phi Beta Kappa for four-year institutions. This was a day of pride and celebration but Matthew was humbled and appreciative of the recognition he received. Especially the pride of Jason, Karen, and his grandmother.

In addition to the Associate of Science Degree, Matthew also received certificates in Business Administration, Accounting, Marketing, Economics, and Finance. He also took courses in Philosophy, English, Math through applied Calculus and Biology.

At the graduation I was pleased to meet Professor Lyle (Math); Professor Fish (English); Professor Loving (Economics); and Dean Trent who headed up the program for Northeast. All commented on his hard work, ability, work ethic, and attitude. Matthew and I also met the graduation speaker who was Dr. Stanley Andrisse, a scientist, endocrinologist, and professor at Howard University College of Medicine whose book, "From Prison Cells to PhD: It's Never Too Late to Do Good" tells of his personal journey from prison to his current esteemed position. After Dr. Andrisse's talk, Professor Loving (Economics) said to me, "Matthew could do that too if he had the chance."

We have been trying to get permission for some of the Northeast professors to contact you regarding Matthew. Hopefully, permission will be given in time for you to consider their comments.

Throughout my time with Matthew, he has never tried to excuse himself or blame anyone for his offence or his situation. I wish all the people who have spoken to me about Matthew over the years could be in touch with you, but the system does not allow that. The variety of people and the intensity of their opinions about Matthew, the man he is today, is impressive and speaks highly of his character.

I have seen him move from a frightened teen, to a man who lives with remorse, but who strives to make a positive contribution to whatever situation he finds himself in. He wants his life to mean something.

I implore you to find mercy and leniency when Matthew comes before you and sentence him to the minimum time his plea allows.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Barbara Kelly

February 1, 2025

The Honorable Thomas A. Varlan

United States District Court
Eastern District of Tennessee
800 Market Street
Knoxville, Tennessee 37902

Dear Judge Varlan,

I write to you not as a legal expert but as a man who has spent his life in service — twenty-eight years as a public school teacher and ten years walking alongside incarcerated men, witnessing their struggles, failures, and in rare and remarkable cases — their redemption.

Today, I appeal to you as a judge — a guardian of justice responsible for distinguishing between those remaining unchanged and those truly transformed.

I met Matthew Estes a decade ago through the Kairos program, a ministry providing spiritual refuge for incarcerated men seeking to change their lives. In the beginning, I did what any reasonable person does in that environment — I kept my distance. I've seen too many men claim to have changed when, in truth, they haven't.

Words are easy; fundamental transformation is not.

But after months of observing Matthew, I saw something different. After years of knowing him, I can say with absolute certainty that he is not the same person who was sentenced as a juvenile.

Matthew's past is not mine to justify, and it is not a past he has ever tried to excuse. He accepted responsibility for his actions, pleaded guilty, and did not fight the system or seek loopholes—he faced the consequences.

But justice is not meant to be blind to redemption. If transformation holds no weight, if growth is irrelevant, then what is the purpose of rehabilitation?

Matthew endured unimaginable abuse from infancy through childhood — horrors that could have destroyed him. Many who suffer such trauma never escape its grip. Instead of succumbing to bitterness or violence, Matthew fought to rise above it. He turned to faith, to education, and service. He became a man of discipline, not anger, of patience, not resentment.

That kind of transformation is rare, yet Matthew has walked that path. And now, after years of doing the difficult work to rebuild himself, he faces yet another punishment that disregards the man he has become. Is this what justice demands — to condemn a man forever, no matter who he has become? His transformation is rare — and it deserves recognition.

Not all prisoners change. Some continue down the same destructive paths, showing little regard for those they have harmed. I have met those men and do not write letters on their behalf. I am writing to you today because Matthew is not one of them.

I have watched him live out his commitment to change, not just for himself but for others. He has pursued education with excellence, earning a college degree. With honors.

He has mentored fellow inmates—especially those with intellectual disabilities, men who would otherwise be left behind. He has lived with purpose despite the walls meant to contain him, volunteering in the prison library and leading Bible study groups.

Perhaps most remarkably, Matthew has built a life of faith. And faith, as you know, is not merely a belief but an action. The Bible teaches in 2 Corinthians 5:17, *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone; the new has come."*

If we, as a society, believe in rehabilitation — if we claim that justice allows for change — then we must ask: How do we measure redemption?

This is why I am now so troubled by the federal prosecution against Matthew. While it may be legally permissible, is it morally just? He has already been sentenced once. He has paid for his crime every single day since. To now impose an even harsher penalty — essentially ensuring he will die in prison — does not serve justice; it denies the very possibility of it. The moral implications of this case are significant, and I urge you to consider them.

Judge Varlan, I do not envy the weight of the decisions before you, but I believe in your ability to judge wisely. When we encounter a man who has changed—not in words, but in deeds, over years of proven effort—should the law not recognize it?

Recognizing Matthew's transformation is not just important but an essential test of justice itself. I urge you to weigh this as you make your decision.

Justice is not simply about punishment. It is about fairness. It is about accountability tempered with wisdom. It is about recognizing when a person has truly changed and ensuring that our legal system does not discard redeemed lives.

I do not ask for leniency out of sentimentality. I ask for justice, the kind that acknowledges both responsibility and growth. The kind that understands that a life redeemed is not a life wasted.

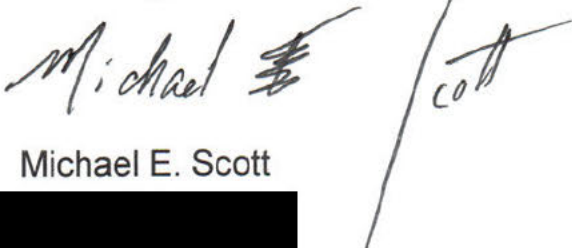
Please consider not only the past but the present. Consider not only the crime but the man who now stands before you. Justice is at its highest when it recognizes guilt and growth. Grace does not erase accountability—it acknowledges when redemption is real.

Matthew's transformation is real.

Your decision will either affirm that justice allows for true rehabilitation or send a message that no transformation—no matter how real—can ever be enough. The integrity of our legal system depends on its ability to recognize both guilt and redemption.

I urge you to weigh both.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael E. Scott". The signature is stylized, with a large, sweeping "M" and a long, thin vertical stroke extending downwards from the end of the name.

Michael E. Scott



NORTHEAST
STATE

February 14, 2025

The Honorable Thomas A. Varlan
United States District Court
Eastern District of Tennessee
800 Market Street
Knoxville, Tennessee 37902

Dear Judge Varlan,

I am writing in support of Mr. Matthew Estes. Matthew was a member of the first cohort of Northeast State Community College students enrolled in an associate degree program at Northeast Correctional Complex. The partnership between Northeast Correctional Complex and Northeast State Community College was funded by a grant through Governor Lee's Correctional Education Initiative (CEI). All courses were offered online. However, several faculty members chose to supplement their classes with in-person instruction or synchronous online course meetings through Zoom.

As the coordinator for the CEI program at Northeast State, I regularly visited the prison to work with the cohort. I became acquainted with Matthew through this role and as one of his math professors. Three other faculty members that taught multiple courses in the program were made aware of Matthew's current situation. I am submitting this letter as the representative from Northeast State with comments by professors Eric Fish, Wayne Loving, and Suzanne Lyle. It was our pleasure to work with Matthew in his pursuit of a college degree.

Matthew completed all courses for an Associate of Science degree in Business Administration between May 2021 and May 2023. The cohort structure required enrollment of between nine and thirteen credit hours each term. Matthew demonstrated academic excellence in challenging courses such as Accounting, Biology, Economics, Literature, Statistics, and Applied Calculus. He was inducted into the Phi Theta Kappa International College Honor Society and he graduated with the highest possible academic honors on May 11, 2023.

In all my interactions with Matthew over a two-year period, he demonstrated positive student behavior. He always spoke and acted in a respectful and courteous manner. He was consistently on time to class and remained on task for several hours each day. Throughout the course of the program, Matthew maintained an exemplary academic record. He was a leader among the students and he contributed to their success by regularly volunteering tutorial assistance.

According to English professor, Eric Fish, "Matthew is an exceptionally intelligent person who could develop his writing talents into something very special. He was upfront in his writings in my classes about what he had done to land himself in prison and why he took the deal that put him there for a 30-year stretch, starting when he was 18. He also related his worries about who

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would care for his brother – who we met at Matthew’s graduation. In my ENGL 1010 course, Matthew also read the entire MLA and APA formatting manuals and asked me questions where my first responses were, “Do what? That’s a thing?”; and he was always correct with his concerns.”

Math professor, Suzanne Lyle, stated “ He is very curious about everything and wants to master whatever he is given. He wanted to keep a 4.0 to show his parents he had done his best. He said “This is the only thing I have ever done that they can be proud of me for.” I also found out from one of the other teachers there that he was applying for a scholarship for correspondence school to continue his education after the associates cohort ended.”

Economic professor, Wayne Loving, contributed the bulleted statements below.

- I do not know the details of Matthew’s case except a minimal amount that he disclosed to me voluntarily. I do not know his motivation for sharing with me or others. I think he has good strategy skills because he is bright. Very bright. I think the early “hand of cards he was dealt” and how he played them was tragic. But it, or prison, or both has made him “long bright”.
- His work in my two economics classes and meeting him in person at graduation both told me he is trying to make the best of the current situation. He is well aware that he has put himself in this position. He knows that “making the best of things” is the only thing he has in his control. So that is what he does.
- He is a good writer and is intellectually methodical and analytical. He can apply what he learns to real world activity and to policy easily. Being a good writer usually means the student is also a strong thinker. He is.
- The classes have clearly been a blessing and an outlet for him per his exchanges with me. But maybe a curse too. He knows what he could have been. Living with that is part of the sentence, I guess.
- I liked him when I met him.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide insight on Matthew’s academic accomplishments. Please feel free to contact me if additional information is needed.

Respectfully,



Malissa Trent

Dean of Mathematics, Director of Learning Support
Northeast State Community College

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